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Setting the Space: Creating Surroundings for an Interdisciplinary Discourse and Sharing of (Implicit) Knowledge

*Zoe Schubert & Elisabeth Reuhl**

Abstract: *»Bestimmen des Raums: Schaffen des Umfelds für einen interdisziplinären Diskurs und Austausch von (implizitem) Wissen«.* The international workshop "Thinking in Practice" was organized to explore scholarly modelling from the perspectives of researchers belonging to various disciplines. This focus on interdisciplinarity made the workshop unlike other academic meetings. Therefore it was important to build an environment and create a surrounding to share not only explicit knowledge connected to the ordinary scholarly work of the participants, but also to invite them to share their implicit knowledge, which often happens in a complex secluded network of relationships, removed from conscious knowledge sharing. Taking these aspects into account, this article reflects upon the created workshop model from an abstract view, outlining the selection of participants, location and format and how the planning contributed to a notably successful event.

Keywords: Scholarly event organization, academic meetings, workshop format, interdisciplinarity, knowledge sharing, implicit and explicit knowledge, modelling, collaboration.

1. Introduction

Exploring scholarly modelling as a formal and informal reasoning strategy across disciplinary boundaries requires gathering a diversity of concepts, methods and views. To consider modelling as the object of such an interdisciplinary investigation, and to see it as the subject matter itself, means finding ways to share appropriate knowledge and experiences from different perspectives. For this, a face-to-face meeting was needed where everything was organized in a way that allows for the transfer and sharing of knowledge and knowledge production, not only in theoretical and scientific reflection, but also in a direct confrontation of contrasting viewpoints. Experts representing different disci-

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plines have to be brought together and so the interdisciplinary workshop on modelling, *Thinking in Practice*,¹ was conceived. By including experienced scholars with their own ideas around the term and concept of modelling, the workshop aimed to collect different opinions and knowledge in order to analyze the intent and varied usages of the term modelling in and beyond the context of Digital Humanities. When bringing together experts with diverse areas of expertise, it is essential to decide on a suitable format to let them share knowledge and experiences of the subject matter gained from their particular perspectives (see Liyanage, Taha, Ballal, and Li 2009).

2. The Workshop Organization - Setting the Space

Knowledge sharing, communicating, collaborating and personal meetings belong to scholarly work and are part of most researchers' everyday lives (see Hirsch 2012, 182). Even if several of the participants of this workshop are connected to the Digital Humanities, which are inherently interdisciplinary (see Thaller 2012), each discipline involved draws on their own specific traditions and methods. To enable the sharing of thoughts across the borders of disciplines during the workshop, it was important for the scholars involved to become aware of the hidden views and assumptions which are often seen as self-evident and are rarely discussed during the ordinary scholarly work within any single discipline. In order to truly benefit from the expertise of all participants, an appropriate method had to be found for bringing to light not only explicit but also implicit knowledge collected through experience, and to make these insights accessible to others (see Nissen 2005, 13). Thus the location, participants, and format are all addressed hereafter.

2.1 The Location – Finding Suitable Surroundings

Concerning the aim of breaking with models and conventions of academic meetings, it was undesirable to use an ordinary, run-of-the-mill meeting room. The location should rather constitute an inspiring surrounding to create a stimulating atmosphere, facilitating continuous sharing as described above. For this reason, *Wahn Manor House*² became the venue of choice (image 1). This historical building has been rented by the University of Cologne for many years, and it houses its theater collection as well as large representative rooms. Because of the connection between the venue and theater – which can be said to be related to modelling in interesting ways – terms and characteristics from this area come to mind and can be helpful metaphors for thinking about the event.

¹ <<http://modellingdh.eu>>.

² <<http://www.schloss-wahn.com>>.

For the workshop we utilized one state room, called Gartensaal (garden hall), to function as stage and auditorium (image 2), while another smaller room, called Chinesisches Zimmer (Chinese room), was used for breaks. Both of them feature luxuriant eighteenth century oil paintings covering their walls, which establish a welcoming and inspiring contrast to the educational surroundings created to minimize distractions for students that are often found in university contexts.

Image 1: Entrance and Front Yard of Wahn Manor House



Image 2: The Workshop Room (Gartensaal)



2.2 The Participants – Bringing together Interdisciplinary Experts

Besides choosing a venue, the search for potential participants is obviously a fundamental step in making the workshop a successful event. According to the intention of the workshop, experts from various disciplines were invited, forming a network of competences around the subject of modelling in and adjacent to Digital Humanities. As this topic has not often been approached from such an interdisciplinary angle before it promised a unique opportunity to create new and unpredictable insights, and it was thus possible to secure primary research-

ers for the workshop. Furthermore, the workshop also presented the chance to make use of modelling as a way to reflect on the participants' own scholarly work and methods.

The resulting list of participants for the workshop was not only interdisciplinary but also diverse from the view of nationality, age, and experiences. The participants consisted of the invited speakers (both active and retired professors), guests (selected PhD students who were invited to listen to the talks), a representative of the organization funding the overall project, and the project team (four principal investigators, one research associate and four research assistants) – almost 25 people in total. The disciplines represented ranged from Archeology, Literary Studies, and Psychology to Computer Science. Continuing the theater metaphor, all attendees became actors, audience, and producers at the same time to share their knowledge and experiences with the whole group in creative ways. Switching roles was made possible through a workshop format that created a scope of action which encouraged participants to do so.

Image 3: The Group of Participants and Organizers



2.3 The Format – Crossing Disciplines, Switching Roles and Creating Impulses

To kick off the workshop, two of the research project's principal investigators acted out a dialogue while wearing masks to underline the theatrical character of their performance and link it to the venue (Ciula et al. 2018, this HSR Supplement). With this presentation, they created an appropriate atmosphere for the workshop and set the stage for the upcoming main acts. In the structure set for the workshop, the speakers were paired up, each person presenting their paper before switching roles and questioning the other on stage (image 5). In this way a dialogue was initiated on the basis of the areas of expertise of both of the presenters, before the discussion was opened to the audience (image 6). The revised articles published in this HSR Supplement also capture these dialogues. Interestingly, the questions from the respondents were comprised not only of those prepared in advance by studying their partnered speaker's position paper (circulated prior to the workshop), but also spontaneous questions which only occurred while engaging with the topic interactively. To document the dialogues, a method was used that takes into account examples and metaphors, and differentiates between explicit and implicit statements (see Geißler and Tardella 2018, this HSR Supplement).

Guided exercises were offered to facilitate the reflection and recording of results within the entire group between dialogue sessions (see Gengnagel 2018, this HSR Supplement). During these parts, all participants were encouraged to think and act creatively, so that they could adopt other, different roles, roles which had the power to heavily influence this part of the workshop's outcome by prompting spontaneous thoughts. The historical Gartensaal offered an inspiring backdrop, and the seats were placed in a U-shape to make the discussion among the group easy.

On the one hand, clear structures were provided by a program designed by the organizers in advance. On the other hand, spontaneity and improvisation by the actors, as well as the switching of roles, were encouraged since it seemed imperative to do so to properly illuminate the very complex topic of modelling. To stimulate the flow of implicit knowledge (see Nissen 2005, 13-4) about it, the workshop offered time and space for informal conversations in the smaller, adjacent room used for coffee breaks and lunch. Other parts of Wahn Manor House like the entrance hall and front yard were also accessible and allowed participants to clear their heads or search for alternative stimuli without moving too far away from the ongoing conversations. While lunch was served in the castle, the dinner was held in a nearby restaurant to provide a spatial separation from the workshop venue and to allow the workshop topic to be left behind if desired.

In order to not only intellectually move through many disciplines and thoughts, but also physically make use of the entirety of the workshop's loca-

tion, the venue itself became the main focus of interest for an hour during a guided tour of the extensive theater collection, which is spread out over the entire building. It contains a variety of items originating from different countries and times, ranging from shadow puppets, miniature stage models, costume designs, archived newspaper articles, and posters, to requisites. This provided some references to a discipline otherwise not represented at the workshop and a more hands-on opportunity to discover links and metaphorical similarities to modelling.

Connected to the workshop's topic, a discussion arose based on the suggestion that this collection represents a very interesting case: typically, a collection of artifacts corresponds to a specific model with respect to the content and the items (where they are located, how they are stored). Similarly, academic meetings are most commonly constituted for a special group of scholars from one discipline. This collection, however, is organized quite differently – as this workshop also aimed to be. The castle offers contorted, narrow corridors and staircases in which parts of the collection are kept; even the historical attic is used for archiving documents. What can be observed in Wahn is in a way the modelling (of the collection) needing to adapt to an existing architectural model, which is originally intended to be used for another purpose (as a Manor House).

While preparing the workshop program, it became apparent that not only the theater collection but almost every museum can be linked to the topic of modelling in some way. For example, the art museum with its artists who used models – people as well as objects and events – to create paintings and sculptures; the ethnographic museum which models different cultures from all over the world in the space of different exhibition rooms, using objects and props to let the visitor experience a different culture for a short while.

Image 4: Øyvind Eide during the Introduction



Image 5: Giorgio Fotia and Paul Fishwick during their Dialogue



Image 6: Audience Discussion after one of the Dialogues



3. Conclusion

The examples that came up during the workshop illustrate the broad use of the term “model” in everyday language. Likewise, the dialogues and discussions during the more scholarly parts made it very clear that the term “modelling” has different meanings and usages in each of the disciplines represented by the participants. Ultimately, this once again serves to emphasize why initiatives such as this workshop are important to define and redefine the term “modelling” more precisely for academic use.

Furthermore, it became clear that it is worthwhile to invest some time, prior to and after the event, to reflect on the organization of the event and the signifi-

cance for the outcomes of its participants, location, and format. The space has to be set in accordance with the subject matter and desired results, and it can be fruitful to search for connections between topic and surroundings. This article identified the main organizational tasks for the workshop *Thinking in Practice* for accommodating the group's interdisciplinarity and bringing to light the participants' implicit knowledge of the topic – exactly the motivation to hold such an event as part of the research project after all. Taking these challenges into account and creating the workshop's surroundings accordingly, as described in this article, contributed to make it a notably successful event.

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